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# The Line of Lilith: Remy de Gourmont's Demons of Erotic Idealism

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According to medieval tradition, the (male) incubus and (female) succubus were demons who preyed upon their victims by engaging in sexual activity with them. Representations of these spirits can be found in various works by the *fin-de-siècle* writer, critic, and poet Remy de Gourmont (1851-1915). In this article, I offer a close textual comparison of the play *Lilith* (1892) and the short story 'Péhor', as well as considering a pseudonymous treatise entitled *Les Incubes et les succubes* (1897) of which Gourmont is likely the author. In the *fin de siècle*, as in the middle ages, the incubus or succubus could be found at the centre of western culture's discourse over abnormal, dangerous, or obscure sexual phenomena. Aware of the prominent place this symbol held in the collective imagination, Gourmont sought to imbue the trope of the demon lover with his own set of phenomenological questions pertaining to the erotic life. Gourmont's work is perennially concerned with the condition of Eros in a world which, according to idealist principles, is ultimately unknowable except as a projection of the individual mind and the fallible senses. In the texts I shall address, Gourmont extrapolates Arthur Schopenhauer's neo-Kantian notion of 'the world as representation' to the realm of demonology, adopting the incubus and succubus as potent subjective phenomena which contribute to an idealist view of erotic dynamics and interactions.

The demon archetype figures prominently in a crisis of Eros and idealism that permeates Gourmont's fiction. It is one that goes back to the suspiciously confident words of Entragues, the protagonist of *Sixtine*: 'Le monde, c'est moi, il me doit l'existence, je l'ai créé avec mes sens, il est mon esclave et nul sur lui n'a de pouvoir' [The world is myself, it owes me its existence, I created it with my senses, it is my slave and nobody has power over it].<sup>1</sup> Here, one detects the influence of J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* in Gourmont's tone of Decadent withdrawal, only the

ivory tower is more explicitly philosophical. Entragues, like most Gourmontian heroes, is an adherent of a dramatized form of Schopenhauerian idealism. He exists in a world which he knows to be mentally constructed, a projection of the mind and the ideas it has developed or received. In Gourmont's essay entitled 'L'Idéalisme', Entragues' words are echoed: 'tout ce que je pense est réel: la seule réalité, c'est la pensée [...] Un individu est un monde' [all that I think is real: thought is the only reality [...] an individual is a world].<sup>2</sup> This statement was not only the basis of a novel like *Sixtine*, but for a whole theory of Symbolist artistic production. To Gourmont, idealism justifies the pure and unhindered expression of the individual mind. Symbolism is described as 'individualisme en littérature, liberté de l'art, abandon des formules enseignées [...] cela peut vouloir dire aussi: idéalisme' [individualism in literature, artistic liberty, abandonment of received formulas [...] this could also mean idealism].<sup>3</sup> The basic principle of idealism, according to Gourmont, is one that can elevate the artist to a state of complete creative freedom. Art is able to free itself from external contingencies. Eros, however, is more problematic. The connection between the body and these 'ideas and images' is ultimately uncertain. As Jennifer Birkett explains, for Gourmont

contemporary sensuality resides in forms and language. In other words, he is aware that the modern body knows itself only *in culture*. Modern sensibility is constructed, its physical responses geared to certain ideas and images. Gourmont seeks to understand the bases of the construction in order to release the (male) imagination from that which within it is repressive, while leaving it free to enjoy those aspects that can still produce the frisson of pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

Though *Sixtine* contains no demons per se, it does contain scenes of disembodied intercourse which strongly prefigure the succubus archetype. In one passage, Entragues invokes Sixtine as one would a spirit: 'Chère créature de mon désir, je me confie à ta magie' [Dear creature of my desire, I entrust myself to your magic], he intones, 'habacle de ma volonté, réceptacle de mes illusions d'amour, évoque-toi et protège-moi!' [vessel of my will, receptacle of my illusions of love, manifest yourself and protect me].<sup>5</sup> Entragues succeeds in conjuring Sixtine, but is sexually overtaken by her. He wakes confused and humiliated by an involuntary ejaculation: 'Ah!

Pollution! c'était Sixtine. Ah! misères des nerfs imbéciles!' [Ah! Pollution! It was Sixtine. Ah! scourge of imbecile nerves!].<sup>6</sup>

As its title suggests, *Le Fantôme* continues *Sixtine*'s theme of the hallucinatory phenomena that constitute erotic desire. Hyacinthe, the eponymous phantom, though corporeal, is also a self-aware projection of her lover's mind. 'Je ne suis ni chair ni esprit' [I am neither flesh nor spirit], she says, 'je suis femme et fantôme' [I am woman and phantom].<sup>7</sup> The mystical prose of *Le Fantôme* serves to highlight an elusive dichotomy of the material and the cerebral which the lovers try in vain to transcend. They yearn, 'sois spiritualisée, beauté charnelle, et sois réalisé, intellectuel fantôme' [be spiritualized, carnal beauty, and be realized, intellectual phantom].<sup>8</sup> Gourmont's amorous characters are eternally marooned between the baseness of carnality and the intangibility of the imagination. Their lovers appear as phantoms or apparitions, idealist 'tricks of the light' symbolizing the unknowable relation between the mind and the objects of perception.

### **Gourmont, Courrière, Huysmans**

In order to trace the metamorphosis of this theme of perceptual uncertainty into the specific domain of incubi and succubi, it is important to consider the network of occult influences which informed it. The perception of Gourmont's role in the occult strain of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence is coloured by two relationships: his romantic partnership with Berthe de Courrière and his literary friendship with Huysmans. By the time Gourmont met Courrière around 1887, she had already earned her reputation as the eccentric *grande dame* among Parisian occult circles. It was not long after Gourmont had first approached Huysmans in his office at the Ministry of the Interior in 1889 that the author of *À rebours* became a regular guest at the homes (soon to be shared home) of Gourmont and Courrière, where he 'sat through many a long evening, listening to his hostess as she discoursed on the occult arts or recalled the "dangerous personal experiences" which she had undergone.'<sup>9</sup> Huysmans's friendship with the pair, however, provided more than the

occasional evening's diversion: Gourmont and Courrière became two of his chief informants in the project that would become *Là-bas* (1891). Moreover, it is by no accident that *Là-bas*'s main female character, Hyacinthe Chantelouve, shares a first name with *Le Fantôme*'s own co-protagonist. In Courrière, Huysmans seems to have found a more platonic continuation of the sensually-charged occult education begun by one Henriette Maillat, an affair which had ended over a romantic dispute. As Robert Baldick describes, '[Maillat] met his pleas with the astonishing claim that, being versed in the mysteries of incubus and succubus, she could have commerce with him or with any other man, living or dead, whenever she pleased.'<sup>10</sup> There is no doubt that Huysmans's occult fascination was stoked by Courrière, who provided the author with both intrigue and insider information pertaining to contemporary Satanism.

Often neglected, however, is Gourmont's direct contribution to Huysmans's literary enterprise. In his letters to Arij Prins, Huysmans praises Gourmont, whom he had conscripted as a textual researcher: 'la bibliothèque nationale est fouillée pour moi, avec rage' [the Bibliothèque nationale is being excavated for me, with zeal].<sup>11</sup> Gourmont 'm'a fait toutes mes recherches à la bibliothèque sur le diabolisme du 15<sup>e</sup> siècle au nôtre' [carried out all my library research on diabolism from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to our own].<sup>12</sup>

### **The question of *Les Incubes et les succubes***

Though it may have served a more banal function in *Là-bas* than Courrière's exploits, Gourmont's research at the Bibliothèque nationale does shed light on an unanswered question about his own work, that of a text entitled *Les Incubes et les succubes*, signed by one Jules Delassus. It was not until 1910 that Henri-Alban Fournier (better known by his pen name Alain-Fournier) cited Delassus as one of 'les pseudonymes les moins connus de l'auteur du Livre des Masques' [the lesser-known pseudonyms of the author of *The Book of Masks*].<sup>13</sup> Assuming for the moment that Gourmont did write *Les Incubes et les succubes*, published in the *Mercure de France* in 1897, the detective work he did for *Là-bas* would no doubt be on display here. The question of

authorship, however, is complicated by Gourmont's fickle relationship with the occult. Patrizia d'Andrea, though ultimately convinced by Alain-Fournier's claim, admits to a number of red flags. In her intertextual study, she cites the contradiction between Delassus's apparent belief in supernatural phenomena and a passage from the *Promenades philosophiques* which negates them entirely: 'J'ajouterais qu'il ne doit venir à l'idée de personne que ces phénomènes obscurs puissent avoir la moindre connexion avec ce que les esprits simples appellent l'au-delà. Il ne s'agit point de surnaturel.' [I add that no one can claim the slightest connection between these phenomena and what simple minds call the *au-delà*. It is not a question of the supernatural.]<sup>14</sup> Delassus, on the other hand, believes that 'Pour expliquer ces phénomènes, il faut bien admettre l'existence du plan astral' [To explain these phenomena, one must recognize the existence of the astral plane].<sup>15</sup>

The Gourmontian provenance of *Les Incubes et les succubes*, however, may lie precisely in its fickle treatment of both sides of the materialist/spiritualist debate. Where the supernatural fails in one area, science provides useful insight, and where science has proved reductive or silent, the writings of inquisitors come forward:

La science, qui dédaigne l'occulte, ne voit dans les faits observés par médecins que des maladies sexuelles dont elle ne recherche pas la cause. Presque seuls, les prêtres connaissent des exemples précis. Mais ils se retranchent derrière le secret de la confession, et refusent de parler, craignant le scandale que pourraient produire des révélations de cet ordre.

[Science, which disdains the occult, only sees sexual maladies in the facts observed by doctors without researching their cause. Precise examples are perhaps known solely to priests, but they hide behind the secret of confession, refusing to speak, fearful of the scandal that revelations of this kind might produce.]<sup>16</sup>

While discussing the summoning of incubi and succubi, however, he admits that '[i]l serait cependant très intéressant d'examiner scientifiquement la possibilité de produire des phénomènes de ce genre' [it would nevertheless be very interesting to scientifically examine the possibility of producing such phenomena].<sup>17</sup> One moment he glorifies the magical texts, the next he sees them as 'recettes ridicules' [ridiculous recipes].<sup>18</sup> In a manner suggestive of Gourmont's idealist world-view, these demons can only be seen through the subjective mirror of each

source. The approaches of science, religion, and the occult are equally considered because they are equally 'wrong' in their claims of objectivity. If *Les Incubes et les succubes* has an argument, it is the subjectivity of the demon. Instead of a theory, Delassus offers a phantasmagoria of writings and folklore with the intent of providing a history of an idea.

### ***Lilith* and the Construction of Sensuality**

The first lines of *Les Incubes et les succubes* state that '[l]es curieux phénomènes de l'Incubat et du Succubat remontent aux temps très anciens, à l'origine du monde' [the curious phenomena of incubacy and succubacy go back to very ancient times, to the origin of the world].<sup>19</sup> This is precisely where Gourmont set his *Lilith*. Its eponymous 'heroine', according to ancient Hebrew interpretations of scripture, was both the original bride of Adam and the mother of all incubi and succubi. Due in large part to a number of reference texts which had become available in the mid-nineteenth century, Lilith had already caught the attention of various artists and writers before Gourmont. She appears, for instance, in Victor Hugo's unfinished *La Fin de Satan* (written between 1854-1862), and Gérard de Nerval's collaboration with Bernard Lopez, *L'Imagier de Harlem* (1852). In England, she was captured by Dante Gabriel Rossetti both in verse, with 'Eden Bower' (1869), and on canvas a year earlier.

The spirit of Romanticism looms over the opening scene of Gourmont's *Lilith*, particularly in its characterization of Satan as a sympathetic outcast. Before his banishment from heaven, he attempts to dispute Jehovah's planned creation of man, but is drowned out by a chorus of sycophantic angels who praise Jehovah's every dictate with constant cries of 'Hosannah! Seigneur, ton œuvre est bonne!' [Hosanna! Lord, your work is good!].<sup>20</sup> Satan's doubt festers as Jehovah struggles to acquire the clay from which Adam will be moulded. Anticipating the rape of its fertility, the earth initially refuses to yield its clay, protesting 'Je ne veux pas que ma substance serve à former des créatures qui un jour m'abreuveront de sang' [I do not wish for my substance to serve in the formation of creatures who shall one day sup my blood].<sup>21</sup> 'Il n'aura pas

son argile!’ [He will not have her clay!],<sup>22</sup> repeats an increasingly irate Satan, as indeed neither Gabriel nor Michael manage to strike a bargain with the unyielding earth on Jehovah’s behalf, until Azrael narrowly succeeds at last, by force.

Once the clay has been secured, Gourmont introduces several new *dramatis personae*: Le Soleil [The Sun] and La Nuit [Night], the latter presiding over Les Ténèbres [Darkness] and Le Silence [Silence]. These personified qualities follow a dichotomy which mirrors that of Jehovah and Satan: the diurnal and the nocturnal. As Jehovah works to mould the clay, there is a vivid scene which begins ‘L’approche des ténèbres excite son activité, et quand la nuit descend, la statue est complète’ [The gathering darkness hastens his activity, and once night descends, the statue is complete].<sup>23</sup> Jehovah’s role as both a dictator and a creator of forms belongs symbolically to the day. As he rushes to finish the statue before nightfall, he relies on the sun as a collaborator. This concludes with a vivid stage direction in which the sun emits one last brilliant flash of life-giving light before disappearing, along with Jehovah. This is followed by a starkly contrasting nocturnal scene. At night Adam’s form is soft and vulnerable. La Nuit asks Le Silence to protect Adam, not from whatever may lurk in the darkness, but rather from the intrusive phenomena of daytime. The scene hints at an uncertain transformation occurring beneath the veils of Les Ténèbres, inaccessible to both the audience and, in theory, Jehovah. Gourmont establishes its opposition to Jehovah’s realm through stylistic devices as well. In contrast to the repeated, exclamatory hosannas and decrees of earlier, the voice of La Nuit is without exclamation. It insists on silence, careful not to damage Adam’s fragile ears.

It is important to mention here that the name ‘Lilith’ has its root in the Hebrew word for night, and although she has not yet been introduced, we can already see Gourmont beginning to define the significance of her nocturnal affiliation. We recall Jehovah’s forceful violation of the earth’s fertility, suggested by the theft of its clay. As the diurnal realm becomes Jehovah’s accomplice in this crime, night (‘Lilith’) emerges as an opposing force.

As the sun returns, so does the imperious, exclamatory language of the day. Entering with



a flamboyant ‘Me voilà!’ [Here I am!],<sup>24</sup> its bright heat changes the wet clay into ‘un infrangible diamant’ [a resilient diamond].<sup>25</sup> Here, with the final crystallization of the statue, is where Jehovah and Satan take their sides. Satan is not convinced that man has been perfected. ‘Cette créature n’est pas déplaisante, mais elle sent un peu la boue’ [This creature is not unpleasant, but it smells slightly of mud].<sup>26</sup> Satan can quite literally sniff out that which is still damp and undesignated beneath the fixed, Apollonian surface that the sun has created on Jehovah’s behalf. In other words, he focuses his attention on the aspect of man which still belongs to the nocturnal side. ‘Vous êtes le jour’ [You are the day], he says in farewell to Jehovah, ‘je serai la Nuit’ [I will be the Night].<sup>27</sup>

It is worth noting that Gourmont would use the same imagery in his famous portrayal of Stéphane Mallarmé in an essay from *La Culture des idées* (1900). Mallarmé’s poetry is ‘personnelle, repliée comme ces fleurs qui craignent le soleil; elle n’a de parfum que le soir’ [personal, retreating like flowers that fear the sun; it only fragrant at night].<sup>28</sup> It is ‘plein de doutes, de nuances changeantes et de parfums ambigus’ [full of doubts, shifting shades, and ambiguous perfumes]<sup>29</sup> in contrast to the ‘affirmations lourdes’ [heavy assertions]<sup>30</sup> of establishment literature. The nocturnal/diurnal divide in *Lilith* is consistent with this later critical concept of the delicate subjectivity which evades the clear, totalizing daylight of progress and convention. From this perspective, the duelling forces into which Adam is born correspond to a politics of sensibility. Moreover, if we recall Birkett’s argument that ‘the modern body knows itself only *in culture*’ and that ‘its physical responses [are] geared to certain ideas and images’,<sup>31</sup> then this would also imply a politics surrounding the construction of sensuality. However, as *Lilith* is set at the origins of the world, there is nothing ‘modern’ about it.

Adam, in his first moments on earth, experiences a blissful state of undifferentiated energy. ‘Comme je suis beau, comme je suis vaste!’ [How beautiful I am, and how vast!], he observes. ‘L’immensité de mon être évolue à l’infini: tout cela, c’est moi. Je contiens le ciel et le soleil, et les animaux qui se meuvent et les oiseaux qui volent’ [The immensity of my being

expands infinitely. I encompass the sky and the sun, the animals that move and the birds that fly].<sup>32</sup> He is stimulated by the supposed lack of boundaries between himself and all other phenomena, ignorant of the forbidden or harmful. There is a sensuality in his language which suggests a sexual stimulation associated with the sense of infinity. In fact, it is remarkably close to a scene from *Le Fantôme* describing an orgasm, an experience of ‘toutes les richesses de l’infini [...] sa propre essence avait absorbé et détenait à jamais l’essence de tout’ [all the riches of infinity [...] her own essence had absorbed and forever held the essence of everything].<sup>33</sup> As in all of Gourmont’s descriptions of sexual rapture, however, the brief moment ends in humiliation as the self re-establishes, or, in Adam’s case, establishes itself for the first time. He tries to touch the sun, to catch a flock of birds, and is puzzled by the distance which now appears between himself and other objects. The distinctions between his senses begin to appear. Adam approaches a blossoming cherry tree and is surprised at the coarseness of its bark against his skin when it looked so soft from far away. This is when Jehovah’s servant, the angel Raziel, descends to begin Adam’s education. ‘Raziel vient à son secours, cueille une branche fleurie, la lui fait respirer, cueille un bouquet de cerises et une à une les lui met dans la bouche’ [Raziel comes to his rescue, plucks a flowering branch, makes him smell it, plucks a bunch of cherries and one by one puts them in his mouth].<sup>34</sup> Sensuality is being constructed here. Sensory pleasure is becoming organized and therefore limited, initially perhaps through independent discovery but ultimately through the indoctrination to an established order. Adam needs this training and individuation to successfully navigate his environment, but it is at the expense of the earlier moment of ecstasy.

The angel, acting for Jehovah, tells Adam what his different body parts are for. This is compromised when, in a comic moment, we discover that the genitalia were created with no clear aim in mind: ‘ceci pour entendre, ceci pour voir, ceci pour manger, ceci pour... Je ne sais pas...’ [this for hearing, this for seeing, this for eating, this for... I do not know...].<sup>35</sup> It is from this oversight that Lilith is brought into being. Jehovah decides that ‘il n’est pas bon que l’homme

soit seul' [it is not good for man to be alone],<sup>36</sup> and creates a female from the leftover clay. She is designed in response to Adam's sexuality, but sexuality itself has not been given a purpose. Hence, she is sterile. In her first moments, Jehovah realizes that he has not provided an accountable meaning to the sexual impulse, but has rather reproduced and dilated its chaotic presence in the world. This is of course insupportable in Jehovah's vision of order, and thus he sends her to hell to become the companion of Satan.

LILITH

la première, et d'une voix luxurieusement lasse qui, après chaque invocation meurt en une caresse:

Iod, ô mâle, Dieu et Phallus, axe du monde et axe de l'Esprit, je te révère, ʾ, ô mâle!

[firstly, and in a lustfully weary voice which, after each invocation, ends in a caress:

Yod, O male, God and Phallus, axis of the world and axis of Spirit, I honour you, ʾ, O male!]

SATAN

répond:

Hé ô femelle, Matrice et Beauté, indolence spirituelle, lascivité, je te révère, ʾ, ô femelle!

[replies:

Heh, O female, Matrix and Beauty, spiritual indolence, lasciviousness, I honour you, ʾ, O female!]

LILITH

Va, ô copulation, femelle et mâle, trompe et calice, obscurité du demain, je te révère, ʾ, ô copulation!

[Vav, O copulation, female and male, horn and chalice, darkness of tomorrow, I honour you, ʾ, O copulation!]

SATAN

ʾ, ô femelle!

[ʾ, O female!]

LILITH

Ne m'appelle pas Hé, appelle-moi Stérilité. Ne suis-je pas l'Inféconde?

[Do not call me Heh, call me Sterility. Am I not the Infertile One?]<sup>37</sup>

In these post-coital vows, Satan and Lilith pronounce the divine name of God (indicated by the Hebrew letters). The emphasis is on blasphemous, ecstatic ritual, sublimating the carnal act through forbidden language. Their genitalia are not reproductive organs but the aesthetic, ceremonial objects ‘trompe et calice’ [horn and chalice]. This scene is again close to the action of *Le Fantôme*, in which the lovers experiment by imbuing their intercourse with perversions of Catholic ceremony and liturgical incantations. Where transcendent sexuality in *Le Fantôme* is impossible, Lilith and Satan achieve a fulfilment of Damase and Hyacinthe’s fantasy, as mentioned earlier. Their encounter represents an experience of sexual gratification which, like Lilith herself, has been denied to humanity; an experience untroubled by phenomenological paralysis and dissociated from oppressive contingencies such as reproduction, shame, and mortality.

Gourmont has already deviated liberally from the traditional Lilith sources, and in so doing raises a number of philosophical points. The narratives of the *Zohar* and the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*<sup>38</sup> describe a quarrel between Adam and Lilith. The latter refuses to be subservient and, specifically, to assume the submissive role in sexual intercourse. The reason for Gourmont’s variation might be that the original suggests a built-in, objective sexual code on the part of Adam, complete with an innate system of taboos. According to the Jewish texts, the cause of his revulsion is merely assumed. Gourmont, however, would rather portray Adam as an allegorical model for the gradual construction of individual experience; a blank slate whose sensibility is being deliberately encoded according to the biases of a patriarchal order.

### **‘Savoir, c’est nier’: The Demonic Moment of Sexual Awareness**

When Lilith and Satan decide to visit the garden as Incubus and Succubus, it is immediately after Jehovah has attempted to regain order by creating Eve from Adam’s rib, finally providing a functional aim to the accidental phenomenon of sexuality. Carefully designed to be submissive,

Eve is instructed by Adam (as he himself was instructed by Raziel) to conform to the received system. Interestingly, the regulated nature of the garden affords them a limitless experience of sensual pleasure, a ‘constante plénitude d’un amour inépuisé. Pas de réveil brutal et déconcertant’ [constant plenitude of unflagging pleasure. No brutal and unsettling awakening].<sup>39</sup> For Gourmont, disillusionment and liberty are often woven into the same fabric. *Sixtine*’s Entragues experiences the adverse effects of intellectual freedom upon sexual and romantic gratification; Salèze from *Le Désarroi*,<sup>40</sup> discussing his relationship to women, admits that ‘savoir, c’est nier’ [to know is to deny].<sup>41</sup> It is reasonable that this trope would have its counter-image in an intellectual prison which is also a sensual paradise. By this logic, even Satan and Lilith, because they are free to exhaust the depths of sexual knowledge, have become disillusioned.

Lilith’s carnal explorations with Satan have left her sensually calloused, and she now pines for a new sensation of which she is currently incapable: fecundity. The language she uses is indicative of a fertility envy, a vampiric longing for virgin life forces, a hunger for innocence so that she may renew her own debauchery. ‘La jouissance fuit comme l’eau par un trou’ [Pleasure leaks like water through a hole], she laments, ‘mes sens sont morts ainsi que des feuilles mortes’ [my senses are as dead as dead leaves].<sup>42</sup> This expression gives her a metaphorical womb which has expired, and her vain plea to Satan, ‘Déchire-moi, que le sang coule sur mes cuisses’ [Tear me apart, so that blood runs down my thighs]<sup>43</sup> endows her with a metaphorical broken hymen, a nostalgia for an irretrievable ‘première heure’ [first hour].<sup>44</sup>

Satan and Lilith appear on earth to tempt Adam and Eve to taste the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. When Adam eats, he declares ‘Maintenant, je suis fort, je suis grand, je touche aisément le ciel...’ [Now I am strong, I am tall, I effortlessly touch the sky...],<sup>45</sup> no doubt a reference to the ‘orgasmic’ description of his first moment on earth: ‘comme je suis beau, comme je suis vaste! ... Je contiens le ciel et le soleil’ [how beautiful I am, and how vast! I encompass the sky and the sun].<sup>46</sup> Though no direct mention of sexual intercourse is made, in Gourmont’s view, this moment of the Fall is the first act of incubacy and succubacy. Satan and

Lilith have fulfilled their roles as ethereal tempers, at once desired and feared, exerting an invisible power upon their victims. Having grown tired of their own depleted pleasure, Satan and Lilith annex themselves to the ecstatic sexual awakening of the terrestrial couple. Successful in his temptation, Satan introduces the seven sins as if counting down to a moment of release: ‘Gourmandise, paresse ou lâcheté, luxure... Quand nous serons à sept, je m’en irai tranquille.’ [Gluttony, sloth or cowardice, lust... When we arrive at seven, I will go quietly.]<sup>47</sup> The conventional sins develop as Adam and Eve begin to quarrel in their new environment about the changes to their bodies and thus their regard for one another. However, Satan adds another crucial aspect to man’s suffering.

Enfin, – et ceci sera très amusant, – je veillerai comme un ange sur leur enfance polluée, et quand la lignée de Lilith aura dévirilisé la puberté des mâles, je leur donnerai des vierges qui n’auront ouvert qu’en rêve et symboliquement leurs jambes pures...

[Lastly – and this will be very amusing – I shall preside like an angel over their tainted childhood, and when the line of Lilith has devitalized the puberty of the males, I shall give them virgins who only spread their pure legs symbolically and in dreams...]<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, Adam and Eve too have been ‘symbolically’ defiled. Satan’s vow (as well as his actions) seems to indicate that sexual awareness, rather than intercourse itself, is the Fall which humans will now be doomed to rehearse. Adam and Eve were far from chaste before his arrival. In an early scene, ‘la volupté gonfle et roule dans leurs seins prédestinés les vagues infatigables de l’éternel amour.’ [pleasure swells and surges in their predestined breasts like ceaseless waves of eternal love].<sup>49</sup> This carnal love, then, is not what Adam and Eve have discovered. Rather, in tasting the fruit, they consume for the first time the ‘ideas and images’ suggested by Birkett, a framework through which the untroubled unity of their pre-pubescent sensuality splinters into a chaotic multitude of sins and pleasures.

### **‘Péhor’: A Morbid Vision of Idealist Puberty**

Gourmont would later elaborate on the tragedy of sexual awareness in his short story ‘Péhor’, the first of the *Histoires magiques* (1894), in which he imagines the visitation of an incubus upon a

young girl, Douceline, at the moment of her own pubescent transformation. Before the arrival of the titular demon, Gourmont establishes a similar pre-lapsarian sensual state to what we have just seen in *Lilith*. True to her typifying name ('douce' meaning 'soft'), Douceline exhibits a diffuse, infantile sexuality characterized by a delight in the sensation of softness. 'Précocement caresseuse et embrasseuse' [Precociously prone to caressing and hugging],<sup>50</sup> she is sensually similar to Adam, who was initially drawn to the perceived softness of a cherry tree.

Douceline undergoes a major change at her First Communion. Her religious debut is not portrayed as an extension of parental control, but rather a sphere of sensual delight, a vast array of new sensations and images. Her interest is specifically piqued by a framed image of Jesus, which she is allowed to take home as a gift.

Le Jésus d'où fusait ce jet de carmin avait une face affectueuse et encourageante, une robe bleue, historiée de fleurettes d'or, de translucides mains très fines où s'écrasaient en étoile deux petites groseilles: Douceline l'adora tout de suite, lui fit un vœu, écrivit au dos de l'image: 'Je me donne au S.-C. de Jésus, car il s'est donné à moi.'

[The Jesus from whom this jet of carmine sprayed had an affectionate and reassuring face, a blue robe adorned with golden florets, and translucent, fine hands in which two little redcurrants were crushed in the shape of stars: Douceline immediately adored it, pledged to it, and wrote on the back of the image: 'I give myself to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, for it has been given to me'.<sup>51</sup>

As always with Gourmont, one is seldom sure where the scathing critique of the Church begins and the sincere exploration of its eroticism ends. The incubus Péhor will only arrive after a series of sanguinary episodes which cast a dark complexion on Douceline's affection for the blood of Christ. In the first, she begins to bleed from extended periods of kneeling before the portrait, thanking Jesus for an illness she has developed. With the exaggerated violence and carnality of Catholic piety, Gourmont foreshadows the brutality of Douceline's sexual awakening.

Guérie, elle remercia Jésus des marques blanches qui lui trouaient le front, se livra à de longues éjaculations, à genoux, derrière un mur, sur des pierres aiguës. Ses genoux saignaient: elle baisait les blessures, suçait le sang, se disait: 'C'est le sang de Jésus, puisqu'il m'a donné son coeur.'

Affaiblie par l'anémie de la fièvre, elle avait pendant des semaines, oublié son vice: les mouvements habituels se recomposèrent dans le sommeil.

[Healed, she thanked Jesus for the white marks that cratered her brow, offering up long ejaculations, kneeling behind a wall upon sharp stones. Her knees bled: she kissed the wounds, sucking the blood, telling herself: 'This is the blood of Jesus, for he has given me his heart'.

For several weeks, weakened by the anaemia of her fever, she had forgotten her vice: her habitual actions reconstituted themselves in sleep.]<sup>52</sup>

Through the use of innuendo and double entendres,<sup>53</sup> Douceline's budding sexuality is made indistinguishable from the aesthetics and practices of religious devotion. Gourmont's tactic is to lay bare the implicit eroticism of Catholic worship as a way of exposing that of childhood, these being two spheres in which it is generally ignored or obscured. However, as Douceline's sensuality begins to structure itself around 'ideas and images', such as the visual appearance of Jesus, the theological concept of blood, and the language of devotional prayer, it also begins a process of fragmentation. Her tendency to masturbate, namely, is relegated to sleep and dreams. Douceline's now-repressed habit becomes decisive when, one night, she withdraws a hand stained with menstrual blood. To her, this is an unspeakable degradation which causes her to hide the portrait of Jesus out of embarrassment.

'Les démons sont des chiens obéissants' [Demons are obedient dogs],<sup>54</sup> Gourmont tells us upon Péhor's arrival, indicating that they are summoned by clear conditions. The intervention of Péhor, like that of Satan and Lilith, coincides with the victim's first sexual awakening. Once again, this awakening has nothing to do with the onset of sexual behaviour, but rather with how it is understood and framed. Gourmont highlights this concept by repeating the symbolic motif of Douceline's blood. Between the blood she lovingly sheds for Jesus and the blood she is ashamed to discover on her hand, he suggests, there is only a subjective difference. Following this thread, the incubus replaces Jesus as Douceline's incorporeal lover.

Elle le sentait venir, et tout aussitôt des frissons commençaient à voyager le long de sa peau, faiblement, puis nettement localisés [...] enfin, une explosion comme de feu d'artifice, un craquement exquis où fuselaient sa cervelle, son épine, ses moelles, ses muqueuses, les pointes de ses seins et toutes ses chairs dépidermées.

[She felt him coming, and just as quickly the frissons began to travel across her skin, faintly, then acutely localized [...] finally, an explosion like fireworks, an exquisite shock at the confluence of her brain, her spine, the marrow of her bones, her mucous membranes,



the nipples of her breasts, and her mortified flesh.]<sup>55</sup>

Through a stylistic shift from the vague, polymorphous, and suggestive description of Douceline's earlier sensuality to the explicit mode seen here, Gourmont once again suggests that puberty (and the demon it invites) has more to do with a change of terms than of actions. Where the characters of *Lilith* would have to be performed by actors, Gourmont takes the opportunity in 'Péhor' to clarify the incorporeal, imagined nature of the demon as he sees it. Péhor is 'invisible et intangible' [invisible and intangible].<sup>56</sup> It is clear that Douceline's experience of the demon occurs as a cerebral phenomenon which now accompanies the sensual behaviour she has always exhibited.

One could no doubt interpret the visitation of Péhor as a result of sexual repression, Catholic guilt, or the fever Douceline has contracted. Robert Zeigler sees the encounter to be 'described as pathology',<sup>57</sup> whereas Brian Stableford suggests that it is caused by 'enforced ignorance and social pressure'.<sup>58</sup> Legitimate as these conclusions are, there remains an overriding Symbolist and idealist discourse of what Gourmont in *La Culture des idées* calls 'l'intelligence s'adorant soi-même' [the intelligence adoring itself].<sup>59</sup> Regardless of its roots in repression or illness, Péhor's visitation constitutes a subjective reality so profound that it has a physical effect on the body. For Gourmont, the incubus is a totem of the mind's transcendent ability to deflower itself and the body which houses it. This point is made clear when Douceline undergoes her first (human) sexual encounter, an act of rape to which she is mentally, and miraculously, immune: 'Ne souffrant pas, amplement déflorée par Péhor dont les imaginations étaient audacieuses, elle laissa faire.' [without suffering, having been amply deflowered by Péhor in her audacious imagination, she allowed it to happen.]<sup>60</sup> Armoured by her demonic experience, she laughs in the face of the man (who, fittingly, is a travelling Bible salesman), shrugs her shoulders, and casually walks away.

An episode such as this should perhaps be held in relation to the virgin martyrs of Gourmont's *Latin mystique* (1892) who mocked their torturers as well, deriving strength from

their divine love of Christ. Just as Douceline freely offers herself to the priest, Gourmont translates a fragment on Saint Agatha which reads: ‘Mais celle-ci, plus forte que ses tourmenteurs, des hommes, livra ses membres aux flagellations; combien son cœur est valeureux, clairement le montre à tous sa mamelle suppliciée.’ [Stronger than her male tormentors, she offered her limbs to their flagellation; so brave was her heart, she exposed her tortured breast for all to see.]<sup>61</sup> Gourmont has simply reversed the religious designation: the Roman torturer has become a Christian, and Douceline gives her virginity to Péhor instead of God. While Gourmont does take aim at the hypocrisy of the Church, the weapon he uses is taken from its own mystical tradition. The incubus is (momentarily) redeemed from its evil connotations by providing a form of spiritual strength akin to that of the female martyrs whom Gourmont frequently celebrated.

As a figment of cerebral eroticism, the demon, like the mystical spouse, represents an emancipatory dissociation from the base carnality of the material world. As Gourmont makes clear in works such as *Sixtine* and *Le Fantôme*, however, this dissociation cannot be fully controlled or sustained. Like a Faustian contract, the power and pleasure given to Douceline must be repaid tenfold.

Elle respira, évanouie presque, les yeux clos, les mains ramant parmi les vagues molles du naufrage, qui emportait la damnée aux abîmes... Un baiser d'excrémentielle purulence s'appliqua sur ses lèvres exactement, et l'âme de Douceline quitta ce monde, bue par les entrailles du démon Péhor.

[She breathed, nearly fainting, her eyes closed, her hands paddling among the gentle waves as she sank, accursed, into the abyss... Her lips received a kiss of excremental decay, and the soul of Douceline left this world, ingested by the entrails of the demon Péhor.]<sup>62</sup>

In deciding that Douceline should perish at a young age, Gourmont exaggerates the annihilating quality of sexual awareness. Following her molestation, Douceline joins the ranks of Gourmont's disenchanted heroes: her increasingly morbid illness is mirrored by a weakening of her cerebral pleasure. Upon seeing a group of pregnant women at church, the once-blissful Péhor changes into a monster. In his essay ‘On the Nightmare’ (1910), Ernest Jones describes the conviction of

Peter Sinistrari (also cited in *Les Incubes et les succubes*) that incubi are essentially positive beings, yet who take on a demonic identity if the beholder believes there to be one.<sup>63</sup> This principle can be applied to Douceline's image of Péhor, who has mutated with the knowledge of sexuality's physical dangers.

While Douceline may serve a similar function as Adam in the scheme of Gourmont's demon narratives, her tragedy is also highly gendered. Though Péhor indoctrinates her into the same phenomenological quandary of Gourmont's male characters, he exploits the supposed passivity of the young girl to exaggerate its effects. The ruinous acquisition of sexual knowledge for Adam, like Damase and Entragues, prepares the mind for creative production. Setting to work on the *Sefer Yetzirah* (like Entragues does with 'l'Adorant', *Sixtine's* novel-within-a-novel), Adam and his male descendants double as explorers of the link between worldly estrangement and genius. Douceline, on the other hand, seems to anticipate the misogynistic views which Gourmont would develop in the early part of the twentieth century. Indeed, 'Péhor' may be read as a literal manifestation of one such statement from *Le Chemin de velours* (1902): 'hors de l'amour, il n'y a point de vie pour la femme.' [Outside of love, woman has no life.]<sup>64</sup>

Though questions such as that of gender representation remain thoroughly on the table, I hope to have illustrated here that incubi and succubi, together with their young victims, serve a unique function in Gourmont's erotic discourse. With *Sixtine*, Gourmont began a career-long artistic investigation into the forces that shape erotic desire and sexual gratification. Adopting an idealist position, he dramatized the Schopenhauerian notion of the world as representation in the character of Entragues, a tragic hero of 'la vie cérébrale' [cerebral life]<sup>65</sup> who is forced to confront the limits of immaterial Eros. Sixtine, like *Le Fantôme's* Hyacinthe, takes on spectral characteristics which symbolize the unknowable relationship between the material and the mental, often appearing in sexual dreams which further confound the limits of the body and the mind. Immersed in demonology by virtue of his affiliation with Courrière and Huysmans, Gourmont begins to engage seriously with images of incubi and succubi. Like the supernatural

in general, the mythology and phenomena of demonic sexual visitation offered a symbolic framework for exploring the transcendent nature of the erotic imagination. This exploration, however, reveals certain harrowing discoveries. As much as the incubi and succubi themselves, Gourmont focuses his attention on the pubescent transitions of their young victims. By doing so, he effectively dramatizes the incurable origins underlying the crisis of erotic experience from an idealist standpoint.

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<sup>1</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Sixtine* (Paris: Savine, 1890), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *L'Idéalisme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), pp. 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Le Livre des masques* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1921), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Birkett, 'Images of an Egoist: The Politics of Style and Sensibility in the Work of Remy de Gourmont', in *The Decadent Reader*, ed. by Asti Hustvedt (New York: Zone Books, 1998), pp. 926-38 (p. 931). Italics in original.

<sup>5</sup> Gourmont, *Sixtine*, p. 251.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Le Fantôme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Sawtry, Cambs.: Dedalus, 2006), p. 198.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>11</sup> J.-K. Huysmans, *Lettres inédites à Arij Prins (1885-1907)*, ed. by Louis Gillet, (Paris: Droz, 1977), p. 192.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> Alain-Fournier, *Chroniques et critiques*, ed. by André Guyon (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 1991), p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Patrizia d'Andrea, 'L'ésotérisme chez Remy de Gourmont ou la face cachée d'un ésotérisme idéaliste', in *Actualité de Remy de Gourmont*, ed. by Vincent Gogibu and Nicolas Malais (Paris: Clown Lyrique, 2008), pp. 175-85 (p. 179).

<sup>15</sup> Jules Delassus, *Les Incubes et les succubes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1897), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Lilith, suivi de Théodat* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1906), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

Adam is made from the earth's clay, hence Gourmont's pun on the term 'sentir la boue' [to smell of mud], an idiom meaning 'to stink'.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Remy de Gourmont *La Culture des idées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1900), p. 130.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 132

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Birkett, 'Images of an Egoist', p. 931.

<sup>32</sup> Gourmont, *Lilith*, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Gourmont, *Le Fantôme*, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Gourmont, *Lilith*, p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> The two main Kabbalah source texts of Gourmont's time.

<sup>39</sup> Gourmont, *Lilith*, p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> Having already lost his job at the Bibliothèque nationale due to his dissident article *Le Jonjou patriotisme* (1891),

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Gourmont abstained from publishing *Le Désarroi* due to its themes of anarchy and terrorism. It was written between 1893-1899, and only recently discovered in 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Le Désarroi* (Paris: Clown Lyrique, 2009), p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Gourmont, *Lilith*, p. 84.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>50</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Histoires magiques* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1924), p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> In Christianity, ejaculatory prayer is short by definition ('Hallelujah!', 'Amen!', etc.). Thus, 'longues éjaculations' [long ejaculations] is a suggestive oxymoron.

<sup>54</sup> Gourmont, *Histoires magiques*, p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Ziegler, *Asymptote* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 216.

<sup>58</sup> Brian Stableford, *Glorious Perversity: The Decline and Fall of Literary Decadence* (Rockville, MD: Borgo, 1998), p. 92.

<sup>59</sup> Gourmont, *La Culture des idées*, p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> Gourmont, *Histoires magiques*, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Le Latin mystique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1892), p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Gourmont, *Histoires magiques*, p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> See Ernest Jones, 'On the Nightmare', *American Journal of Insanity*, 66 (1910), 383-417. Later expanded as *On the Nightmare* (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1931).

<sup>64</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Le Chemin de velours* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902), p. 248.

<sup>65</sup> *Sixtine* is subtitled 'Roman de la vie cérébrale'.